

To Look at Life through Women's Eyes: Women's Oral Histories from the Former Soviet Union

Petó, Andrea (Ed.)

Preprint / Preprint

Sammelwerk / collection

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Petó, A. (Ed.). (2002). *To Look at Life through Women's Eyes: Women's Oral Histories from the Former Soviet Union*. New York: Open Society Institute, Network Women's Program. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-72017-9>

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TO LOOK AT LIFE THROUGH WOMEN'S EYES

Women's Oral Histories from the Former Soviet Union



A Kyrgyz Table Cloth: One side depicts a woman, the other, a man.
On her side is a cooking tool and on his, a saddle.

OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE
NETWORK WOMEN'S PROGRAM

To Look at Life through Women's Eyes:

Women's Oral Histories from the Former Soviet Union

PROJECT COORDINATORS

Dr. Debra L. Schultz, Program Director,
Network Women's Program (OSI-NY)

Elmira Shishkaraeva, Civil Society Director
WPC, Soros Foundation-Kyrgyzstan

Dr. Andrea Peto (Hungary)

PROJECT ASSISTANT

Mirlan Mulkubatov
Soros Foundation-Kyrgyzstan

CONSULTANTS

Dr. Andrea Peto (Hungary)
Elena Mescherkina (Russia)

EDITOR

Dr. Andrea Peto (Hungary)

TRANSLATOR

Elena Mironova (Kyrgyzstan)

COPY EDITOR & DESIGNER

Nikki Persley, Program Assistant,
Network Women's Program (OSI-NY)

WOMEN'S ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

Olga Rzayeva (Azerbaijan)
Nargis Halimova (Tajikistan)
Ludmila Miagkaya (Tajikistan)
Guzel Sabirova (Russia)
Elmira Arapova (Kyrgyzstan)
Erkeaim Jorobekova (Kyrgyzstan)
Marfua Tocktahodjaeva (Uzbekistan)
Dona Abdrazakova (Uzbekistan)
Almaz Kadyrova (Uzbekistan)
Galina Datsiuk (Ukraine)
Bakhriniso Kabilova (Tajikistan)
Lala Sarieva (Azerbaijan)
Raya Osmonalieva (Kyrgyzstan)
Janyl Bokontayeva (Kyrgyzstan)

Team of Scholars (Georgia)

Marina Tabukashvili, Liana Melikishvili,
Mariam Sejniashvili, Maka Harshiladze,
Guram Odisharia, Ketu Ugulava,
Zeinab Filipova, Nana Benashvili,
Tamta Djaiani, Tsisana Goderdzishvili,
Tinatin Kazahashvili, Ketevan Kobaladze,
Gina Chelidze, Maya Mamatsashvili,
Nestan Chhikvadze, Bela Tsarahova

Mission

The Network Women's Program of the Open Society Institute promotes the advancement of women's human rights, gender equality, and empowerment as an integral part of the process of democratization. The Program encourages, supports, and initiates gender-inclusive projects in the countries of the Soros foundations network.

The Women's Program seeks to raise public awareness of gender issues, influence policymakers to develop gender-sensitive policies, and eradicate violations of women's rights. It works to create effective and sustainable women's movements, promoting exchange and cooperation among women's organizations locally, nationally and internationally.

Open society cannot exist without measurable and accountable responsibility for gender equity and diversity. Neither can it exist without the full participation of women in the solving of political, economic and social problems.

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Introduction

Dr. Debra L. Schultz, Elmira Shishkaraeva

The Network Women's Program of the Open Society Institute (Soros Foundations Network), is pleased to present *To Look At Life Through Women's Eyes: Women's Oral Histories From the Former Soviet Union*. The Network Women's Program (NWP) promotes the advancement of women's human rights, gender equality, and empowerment as an integral part of democratization. The program encourages, supports, and initiates gender-inclusive projects in the countries of the Soros foundations' network.

The Women's Program sees education from the perspective of human rights, active citizenship, and the development of civil society. Its mission is founded upon the belief that open societies cannot fully develop without the contribution of women's critical thinking and perspectives.

The Women's Oral History Program in Central Asia, the Caucasus, Russia and Ukraine is an integral part of the Network Women's Program initiatives on gender and education. The oral history program extends NWP's activities in women's and gender history. NWP's September, 1998 "Inaugural Conference: Women's Studies and the Countries in Transition" in Belgrade, and the October 1999 Minsk conference on "Women's History and the History of Gender in Countries in Transition" created a deeper understanding of the richness and complexity of women's history and gender studies in Central/Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. This history needs to be acknowledged and analyzed in order to catalyze and inform progressive change for women in the region.

NWP'S November 2000 Budapest workshop, "Women's Memory: Oral Histories from Transition: Theory and Practice," brought together scholars from Central/Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics. The workshop demonstrated that scholars from Central Asia, the Caucasus, and several other former Soviet countries have just started research in women's history. The voices and experiences of women in Central Asia and the Caucasus are not yet part of the emerging effort to preserve women's memories before, during, and after socialism. Consequently, in July 2001, in collaboration with the Soros Foundation – Kyrgyzstan, the Network Women's Program sponsored a women's oral history workshop for 20 scholars (from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan). Led by an international team of scholars from Russia, Hungary, Turkey, Uzbekistan, and the United States, the workshop provided new concepts, and opportunities to practice newly acquired skills (such as the ethics and the "art" of conducting in-depth interviews; oral history methodology; and gender analysis).

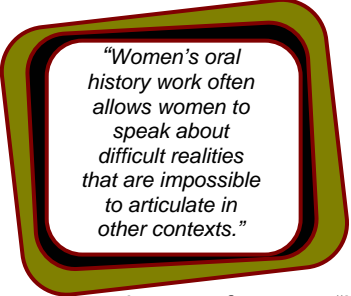
The program includes an ongoing mentorship component, linking researchers with workshop faculty. The Network Women's Program and participating Soros foundations are supporting the research projects of many of the workshop participants. Participants received an extensive Women's Oral History Reader in Russian, which will be distributed more widely to gender studies programs in the region. Many of the oral histories based on new research will be published in local languages. In addition, NWP will publish an edited volume of excerpts from participants' work in both English and Russian.

This publication provides a small sample of the exciting research work undertaken by women scholar/activists from eight former Soviet countries, reclaiming the voices of fourteen women whose experiences illustrate the challenges and small victories of life in soviet and post-socialist times. We hope that it will provide a vision of the region's diversity and rich history, as well as help create linkages between scholars of this region and the international feminist community.

A Note from the Editor

Dr. Andrea Peto

The Women's Oral History Program supported by the Open Society Institute, Network Women's Program aims to promote the use of women's oral histories for both academic and political purposes. Oral history is an accessible and empowering tool for preserving and presenting women's realities to their own communities, to international academic and politically informed audiences interested in the region, and to global women's networks. Women's oral history work often allows women to speak about difficult realities that are impossible to articulate in other contexts. The process is empowering for both the interviewer and interviewee.



"Women's oral history work often allows women to speak about difficult realities that are impossible to articulate in other contexts."

Research on women's recollection is new to Central Asia, and has dynamic intellectual and political possibilities in these countries which have much in common including a shared soviet past, inter-ethnic conflicts, deteriorating economies, military conflicts and the resurgence of religious traditionalism. In this part of the world, women's lives have not been chronicled, not only because of the monolithic tradition of historical writing during Soviet times, but also because of religious and cultural practices that deem only the experiences of men as "historical."

The women's stories in this publication represent a rich and fascinating small sampling of the submitted collection. They are grouped around the urgent issues that deeply affect women and offer an insightful view into the hidden world of women's experiences.

In order to introduce their work to global women's networks, the participants of this project were asked to choose only one woman's story from the stories they compiled over the past six months. Editing this collection was a great honor, though, it was difficult to convey the richness of all the submitted material in a brief publication. However, in 2003, the individual and collective projects will produce a joint publication in Russian and English, which will offer a more detailed collection of stories about the women in Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, and Tajikistan.

The work of this group of women from different countries and with different educational and ethnic backgrounds is an important step towards promoting social equality in these Central Asian countries.

Overview of the Region

Elmira Shishkaraeva

The countries of the Caucasus, Central Asia, Ukraine and Russia are presented in this collection as a distinct region, which has a common past and present. Despite the complex historical interconnections among these countries, we have chosen to focus on one historical period, when all of these countries were a part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (1917-1991).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the countries located next to Imperial Russia were at different economic and social levels of development. For instance, the Baltic countries were closer to Western European countries in economic and governmental development, whereas, Central Asia was a region of mostly nomadic tribes and basic agriculture. The social structure in these countries along with almost everywhere in the world was patriarchal.

The Soviet experiment of transforming societies directly addressed the status of women. There are few examples of reform that have had such an integral, enduring impact and as quickly. Widespread literacy was achieved in one or two decades. Women received access to education, health care and technological progress, and legislation protected their rights, which was revolutionary for the time. In addition, an effort was made to bring women out of private life and integrate them into work outside the home, but that was because the Soviet state needed a low-paid working class. In general, the new regime could not shake the patriarchal nature of the society. In fact, the exploitation of women's work took on another dimension: in the family and in production through field and factory work.

The women's stories in this collection are based on different periods throughout the regime of the USSR and after its collapse. The age of Stalinism (the era of control by state leader, Joseph Stalin) is captured in a few of the works in this collection. The projects of the team of Georgian scholars and Sarieva deal with the social terror and total state repression towards citizens, and Datzuk's project focuses on the economic crisis, which resulted in widespread famine and the death of millions. During World War II, some countries that were not involved geographically, nonetheless lost people to the war and also worked to provide economic resources for the war effort. The daily life of ordinary soviet women, filled with hard work in factories and fields, and emotional challenges, was reconstructed in the projects of Osmonalieva, Kabilova and the team of Uzbek scholars.

The history of the USSR from the beginning of the 1960's until its demise in 1991 saw ongoing weakening in the centralized power of the State. Economic and ideological distortions, nationalism and the concentration of power in the hands of local elite groups ostensibly broke the Union. Bloodshed accompanied this disintegration in remote areas of the USSR. Internal conflicts based on ethnicity, religion, and economic status sprung up in many areas. Military forces harassed citizens in an attempt to settle the ethnic conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijani. This resulted in the loss of many innocent lives among citizens on both sides. The events described in the work of Rzaeva relate to this period.

1991 witnessed the final collapse of the Soviet Union. A few pieces in this collection describe the history of the post-soviet era. Halimova's project focuses on Tajikistan during the Civil War of 1992-1997. Topics of ethnic and religious identities, which became much more important to people during the process of gaining independence, are presented in different ways in the projects of Sabirova, Maygkaya, Arapova and Jorobekova. Today the countries of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Uzbekistan constitute independent states and are devoted to democracy and development. The transition to the market economy and the break up of existing economic ties resulted in an economic crisis, which has impacted women drastically. Unemployment and poverty, the virtual absence of women at decision-making levels, and the revival of patriarchal and religious traditions are current realities that affect women disproportionately.

It should be noted that not all women are passive participants of social transformation. Women have entered the area of small business, where they do not need initial capital, but their incomes are low. Bokontaeva's project researches women who achieved success in business in the rural areas of Kyrgyzstan. Many socially active women have found their place in the non-governmental sector as well. Women's NGOs are changing into a significant social movement. They are working on the issues of women's and children's rights, violence against women, discrimination in the economic sphere, reproductive health, and gender education.

As stated in the introduction, this is only a small sample of the exciting research work undertaken by women scholars of the region and this is only the beginning of the process.

Brief reference:

- 1) Central Asian former Soviet Union countries are Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. They share borders with Russia, China, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Their population is over 55 million. Religions include: Sunni and Shiite Muslim and Russian and Eastern Orthodox denominations.
- 2) Caucasian former Soviet Union countries are Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. They share borders with Turkey, Iran, Russia and Kazakhstan. Their Population is over 16 million. Religions include: Georgian Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Muslim, and Armenian Apostolic.

Women's Stories about Military Conflicts

A War without Documents: Memory of Women from Tajikistan about the Civil War (1992–1997)

NARGIS HALIMOVA (Tajikistan)

When asked why the “Oral History” Project was attractive to her, Ms. Halimova replied: “First of all, the Project enabled me to work with people. During my work with the Project, I got acquainted with many interesting people. It was difficult both emotionally and physically, but it was creative work that will produce important results in the future.”

As an historian and a woman, she chose the given topic because she witnessed this tragic period firsthand and feels she knows the kind of psychological and often physical violence women experience during such crises. She knows how much women see, hear and experience. However, women's sufferings, emotions, and opinions are not recorded anywhere and are not studied. Consequently, women and their contributions are not visible in history. Her project aims to make the women of Tajikistan visible, and to give them an opportunity to be heard in their new history.

Ms. Halimova has archived a dramatic collection of oral stories from women in Tajikistan. The following is the story of a woman who witnessed the civil war, lost her husband and house, but managed to save her children. She has chosen to remain anonymous.



F. was born in 1949 in the Lenin district, Sovkhoz “Guliston”, and is Tajik by nationality. The war burst into her life when she was 42 years old. At the time, she had a house, livestock and land. She led a good life. She had a husband, whom she was used to, two married sons, two daughters and three younger sons. Her husband was a *mullah* (local religious leader) in the village; he was well respected and often invited by villagers to conduct different religious devotions. For her, the war started from events in Yavan and Kurgan-Tyube, but acquired a more real “face” when she saw refugees being driven away by the head of the brigade, who was Uzbek by nationality and when she heard shooting in the neighboring village.

After the opposition was overthrown and governmental forces came to power, representatives of some districts were automatically persecuted. Because her husband came from “the persecuted” district, he was murdered. She escaped, but was a refugee in another country for several months. Her memories are still so vivid that she could not help crying while telling her story.

“I got really scared. I went into the house, closed all the windows and switched off the lights. All the children were sitting in the dark. My youngest son started crying. He was asking to turn the light on. My brother ran away. He went to his close friend who is Uzbek and asked for help. They were real friends. His friend hid my brother in a basement. We looked for him but failed to find him.

Eventually, it was his Uzbek friend who showed the enemies where he had hidden my brother. My brother was seized and murdered near the aluminum factory, close to the river. And I was sitting and thinking where I could go with four children. I could not go to Dushanbe as all roads were blocked. Suddenly, four soldiers came into the house. They were all carrying guns and knives. They said, "Leave if you want, but only to Uzbekistan, and do not take anything with you, and give us the keys to the house." They were our neighbors. I gave them our keys and they said that I should hurry up, otherwise people from Kulyab (a region of Tajikistan) would come and there would be no mercy. I took only necessary clothing for my children and we went to Uzbekistan through cotton fields. There was no food, no water. We walked for three days. We had to drink water from swamps. Eventually, we reached Uzbekistan. I suspect that our neighbors murdered my husband. One old man saw how they murdered my husband and he buried him. But this old man was also killed. If he were alive, he could show us the place where he buried my husband. [A sigh] I wish I at least knew where my husband was buried. I could put a fence around that place so people wouldn't step on it."

Nargis Halimova was born in 1961 in Tajikistan. She graduated in 1983 from the Tajik State Lenin University, Faculty of History. She works as a research officer in the department of Sociology at the Institute of Philosophy and Law of the Academy of Sciences of the Tajikistan Republic. She lives in Dushanbe.

To Look at the Tragic Events of January 20, 1990, in Azerbaijan through Women's Eyes

OLGA RZAYEVA (Azerbaijan)

The aim of Ms. Rzaeva's project is to trace how the attitudes of women in Azerbaijan are changing and to place women into the country's modern history.

"Oral stories explore the same event from many points of view. They change the situation—telling more about the significance of an event than about the event itself."

The tragic events, which began in Baku on January 20, 1990, when tanks crashed into unarmed demonstrators in the main square, have been covered by mass media and in various documents and literature for 12 years. Yet, the voices of many women participants have not been heard.

Originally, Ms. Rzaeva selected respondents based on differences in their social status, education, and religious and ethnic backgrounds. However, while conducting the interviews she realized that the emotional attitude of women towards the tragedy didn't depend on those factors. Women preferred to recollect the events in different ways and in different order based on the priorities in their life at the moment of the story telling. It then became more important for her project to reveal women's attitude towards the events, their psychological state during and after the events, and their understanding of the events.

"Oral stories explore the same event from many points of view," says Ms. Rzaeva. "They change the situation—telling more about the significance of an event than about the event itself."

The following interview reveals not only the attitude of Azerbaijan women towards the events in 1990, but also the difficulties of the post-communist period.



Sona Atayeva was directly involved in the tragic events in Azerbaijan on January 20, 1990. When troops came to Baku and shot unarmed civilians, she and her husband were seriously wounded. The interview takes place in her home.

"I put the children at ease, gave them food. Then buses close to our house began to collect people and take them to the square. My husband decided to go. I said to him: "Don't go. I had a bad dream last night with blood and darkness." He answered "I'll see what's going on there by the fires on the square." He went away. By 12 o'clock he hadn't returned and I started worrying. Suddenly, I heard screams and firing. I thought that people in the square were shooting rockets into the sky. From the balcony, I saw glowing, red lines. Suddenly something made me leave the house. I went into the street. I ran like a lunatic. I did not realize where I ran. Screams of horror. I saw my husband. When he saw me he almost went mad, he was afraid and shouted at me: "What are you doing here?" I said I

was looking for him. He shouted like hell. Suddenly, someone threw an ignited gasoline-filled bottle. It fell on my husband. His trousers and legs were burnt.”

“People were allowed unpaid leaves, many hospitals sent sick people home, and the police were deprived of weapons. A lot of people died there. It seems to me now that these things were done according to a well-prepared scenario. Because otherwise how could they have happened. People did not expect the attack—not even those who’d worked for the government all their life. For example, I was a member of the Communist party. I started as a dishwasher and then became a chief cook. People always respected me as a worker.” [Keeps silent for a few minutes]

“...Yes, then I dragged my husband to the ambulance. I saw that from the Shamahinka, down from the Sumgait road the tanks were moving. I crossed the street and rushed to the wounded people who were lying there. Two of them I carried and put beside the road, close to the fires, close to the trees. They installed a monument there. But the third one I failed to save. As I ran towards him, a tank drove into him and crushed him. It happened so close to me that blood spurted in my face. Do you believe me, that 12 years passed and I still smell his blood? I rushed back, took the two other people and my husband and put them inside the ambulance. I asked, “Where do you take them?” as there was no room for me in the van. I think women are much stronger than men. The men were in the van and I, a woman, was left aside. I looked around and saw blood, wounded people. Everybody was screaming, including the men. I came to myself as if I was in a dream and realized I was running for my life in the direction of the Metro. When I got there, I saw a tank coming from the former Avakian Street; it was crushing everything. Then it turned and moved close to the fire where most of the people were although many of them fled. I realized that it would trample them.

Without thinking about what I was doing, I took two stones and threw them at the tank. They thought I had explosives in my hands. When they turned and flashed a light on me I thought: What am I doing? Afterwards people asked me: “What could you do with a stone against a tank?” I said that stones would not damage the tank, but I was acting instinctively as if something inside was pushing me. If there were no stones, I would have scratched them with my nails. When the light dazzled me, I came to myself and remembered my children. Then I started running home and they shot at me. I ran as far as a shop and the bullets hit the glass window. Debris fell down on my head. [She shows the scars]. Can you see that scar on my forehead? There are scars all over my head; my hands are covered with scars; I was cut everywhere.”

“I begged the doctor not to register me—to let me go to my children. The doctor said, “Why not register you?” I was afraid I’d lose my job. I earned 50 rubles per week (on top of my salary)—big money at that time. The doctor agreed to let me go. After that I could not work for 40 days. My mother-in-law brought my husband home from the hospital because he was not officially registered.

Everybody was afraid. The wounds healed and everything seemed fine. I started working, but after 6 months I felt sick at work and fell down. I later found out that I had a brain injury. A year passed and one morning I could not get out of bed. I spent 11 months in the hospital. At that time there was a rule that if you were away from work for 4 months because of illness they automatically fired you and you become an invalid. They did not fire me; they waited 11 months for my return. They were very supportive. They paid all my sick leave and provided material support.”

Born in 1960 in Baku, Olga Rzayeva graduated from the Azerbaijan State University, Faculty of History. She now teaches history at a music college in Baku, and is a member of the Board of the Association of Azerbaijan Historians and the League of Protection of Children's Rights. She lives in Baku.

Women's Stories about Ethnicity

Women's Oral Histories: Multiethnic Georgia in the Last Century

TEAM OF GEORGIAN SCHOLARS

This collective project aims to collect oral histories of women who are representative of ethnic minorities in Georgia. In Georgia, a great number of histories, mythologized in one way or another, are used to identify various ethnic groups, which together with severe economic crisis creates threatening tensions for the country.

One of the women interviewed by the team of scholars was Maya Gressel, a seventy-two year old German mother of two who lives in Tbilisi.



“I was born in the town of Kamen in the Novosibirsk region. My father, Joseph Gressel, was German. He was born in 1893 in a small town in Alsace-Lorraine. He was taken hostage during the First World War. Later on, when the sides started to exchange hostages, my father was sent back to Germany. However, Germans chased him because in Russia he became a member of the Communist Party, so he had to return back to the Soviet Union. In Rostov, Communists gave him 100 Chervontsi (Cervonets - a former gold coin and monetary unit of the U.S.S.R.) and sent him to work in Kamen. Here he met my mother and they got married. My father occupied different positions. He was a mechanical engineer on the construction of Chuisi highway. For his excellent work he got a promotion, his administration sent him to Sochi but my mother, Midia Zakharova, could not live there, for a Russian woman, the southern climate without snow seemed unbearable. In 1937, the repressions started and my father was the first dismissed from the party, then fired from his job and later on arrested. By then we lived in a small district of Novosibirsk, in a multiethnic environment; our neighbors were Jews, Tatars and Poles. The majority of them were arrested during the repressions. The government was imprisoning not only men but also their wives, and sending the prisoners' children to orphanages. My mother and I survived, miraculously— they ran out of places in prison, but they fired my mother from her job at once. We were left without any means for existence. By then, our maid, Liza, found a job and started to provide for us, but we still were in serious need. Father's relatives lived in Germany but we did not know them. He had parents and a sister; they used to send him letters. I remember very clearly those letters tied together with a ribbon and a photo of my father's sister in a white dress. All his belongings including these letters and photographs were

confiscated during his arrest. On my mother's side, I had an aunt who lived in Leningrad and an uncle in Suhumi; we went first to him, after selling our small house in 1939. My mother was a literate woman and she easily found a job in the office of State Abkhaz Bank. We lived in a small room on Venice drive, far away from downtown Suhumi. One evening, the KGB visited me (the secret police). An investigator took out a sheet of paper and read: "Josef Gressel was sent to faraway camps for ten years without the right to any communication." Then he told me: "This is an official letter; unofficially, I ask you never again to inquire about the fate of your father, forget him. That is all, now go!" After three days, someone else came to us; I think he wanted to recruit me for the KGB. "Please tell me who is saying what and where?" he asked. "I live with my mother and do not make friends with anyone," was my response. "But you do know something." He was quite persistent. He kept coming for a while but eventually gave up on me. In 1960, I started to write to Moscow inquiring about my father. In 1961, I received an official answer saying: He was arrested on 28 of November 1937, he was shot on 3 of February of the following year."

"Then I married. My husband was Georgian, Giorgi Chiqovani, a wonderful man. In 1948, I changed my family name and became Chiqovani like my husband. Then I was hiding that I am German, everyone knew that I was Russian. The government was resettling Greeks, so my mother and I worried that they would move us also. It was then that I burnt my father's documents because of fear. These were scary times! One driver, Geti Mgelade had a Greek wife, a very nice woman, her husband knew that they would exile her and he did not come home. She was weeping; we could hear her and were afraid that the same will happen to us. My husband was calming me: "Do not worry, if they resettle you I will come along." We had a wonderful family; four houses next to each other all belonged to our close relatives (my husband's brothers and mother). My sisters-in-law were very kind to each other and us. They were wonderful housewives. By now they have all passed away. I can say that we had a wonderful life despite the fact that we were getting old. We raised a daughter and a son. I thought I had a difficult life but finally I am happy – I have a decent family, children, grandchildren, what else can one want?" (Translated by Tamar Sabedashvili)

Liana Melikishvili (PHD, History), Mariam Sehniasvili (psychologist), Maka Harshiladze (psychologist, candidate of science), Guram Odisharia (writer), Ketu Ugulava (physician), Zeinab Filipova (journalist), Nana Benashvili (historian), Tamta Djaiani (psychologist), Tsisana Goderdzishvili (psychologist), Tinatin Kazhashvili (architect), Ketevan Kobaladze (psychologist), Gina Chelidze (editor, interpreter), Maya Mamatsashvili (editor, interpreter), Nestan Chhikvadze (editor), Bela Tsarahova (editor). The team leader is Marina Tabukashvili (Women's program coordinator of the Open Society Institute-Georgia)

Oral Stories of Russian-Speaking Women Pensioners in Tajikistan who lived in Dushanbe during the 1930–70s.

LUDMILA MIAGKAYA (Tajikistan)

Ms. Miagkaya's project aims to recover the memory of the Soviet period through women's oral stories, and to touch upon the history of women's identity in a multicultural context. The Russian-speaking women who are natives of the central region of Tajikistan have experienced migration, live far from their historic homeland, face cultural adaptation problems and have survived a civil war (1992-1997).

Her involvement in the project is due to her personal experience as an ethnic Russian woman in Tajikistan. "I share the emotional experiences of the women I interviewed. Their stories not only helped me in my quest for my own identity but also helped the interviewees think about themselves and their place in the New World," she says.

Ms. Miagkaya interviewed Valentina Trofimovna, an honored teacher in Tajikistan.



Valentina Trofimovna was born in 1941 and arrived in Tajikistan in 1963 after graduating from the Pedagogical Institute. In 1964, she married a Tajik man. Although her parents organized a large wedding in Ukraine, they were ambivalent about her marriage to a Tajik man. Valentina Trofimovna adapted to the Tajik culture step by step. She observes the Tajik customs, is fluent in the Tajik language, and has decided to be buried according to Muslim custom. She follows the advice of her father: *live in harmony with the culture that has become your destiny.*

"What struck me most in Tajikistan? The clothing, language, bazaars, hospitality... When we first came to Ukraine, my parents still feared for me no matter how much they liked Nuraly (her husband). Alien world, alien society. "I do not understand how you can live there?" my Mother said. "Mum, they are nice people, very friendly." I say, "They are so humane, so kind, very hospitable." She still feared. My sister once wrote to me: "Valechka, if anything happens, take your child and your diploma, nothing more, and run away." I say, "No." And a thought came across my mind: "My God, do people run away from good? Never do they run away from good." Little by little a person has to get accustomed to their environment. That's what I think. "

"And my father used to say to me: "Dear daughter, there is such a saying: if you appear in the world of the blind, then close one eye, if you appear in the world of the crooked, then stand on one leg. So do like that." I told you that I learnt to pray, that I observed all the holidays, even before Nuraly did. He did not keep the fast as long as I did. He said to me, "Well done!" Usually, people say: "It is her husband who made her do that... Everybody knew that my husband never made me do anything; he never demanded from me anything I was not capable of [sighs]. So, I want to be buried

according to Muslim custom. Let God judge where to send me [speaks very softly], either here or there [laughs]. That is my destiny. That has been predetermined by God, so it is not my fault that it happened the way it did.”

Ludmila Miagkaya was born in 1959 in Fergana (Tajikistan). Her ethnicity is Russian. In 1986, she graduated from the Tajik State National University, Faculty of Russian Language and Literature. Since 1987, she has been a Senior Faculty member of the University. She currently lives in Dushanbe.

Women in the World of Mosques: Oral Stories

GUZEL SABIROVA (Russia)

This project proposes to collect and analyze the oral stories of Muslim women in Moscow. When addressing the status of women in Islam, Russian scholars pay little attention to the individual experience of Muslim women in terms of establishing, maintaining and presenting their identity.

The stories collected by Ms. Sabirova not only represent different biographies but also present a different understanding of the sacral character of religion and the reason women go to mosques. This story highlights how women of two different generations—a grandmother and granddaughter—practice and experience the religion differently.



Banu Abi was born 72 years ago in one of the villages of Sergachev Raion of Nijegorodskaya Oblast. In 1952, she was recruited to work as a construction worker in Moscow during the city's economic boom. In 1956, she married an ethnic Tatar—“somebody like her.” She has two sons, a grandson and a granddaughter. She lives with her eldest son in Moscow. Banu, whose parents spent their nights reading the Koran—began praying five times a day only five years ago. However, she had attended mosques in the past, but similar to many Muscovite-Tatars, she went on holidays—Ramadan, Kurban, and she brought a *fitr-sadaka* there. Her decision to learn the prayers was influenced by her peers—other Tatar-women whom she met at the popular *madjalises*. When one reaches a certain age, in certain groups the practice of five-times-a-day prayer is considered desirable. Unlike Banu, who feels like a newcomer to the mosque, her 22-year-old granddaughter is an authority. Over the past six months, she's been studying at an Islamic college. If she graduates from College with excellent results she might be sent abroad to study.

“I go to the Mosque on Otradnoe (the name of the street), which is not far away. I started attending Mosque three years ago. In the beginning, I visited frequently because clothes were distributed there free and they fed us every day. I did not go to the other Mosques. My 22 year-old granddaughter who does not miss a five times a day namaz (prayer service), goes to the old Mosque, which is located on Mira Boulevard. She says that there, even rolls and newspapers are sold. In Otradnoe it's free, and they arrange razgovenie every day. Lots of people go there. Only in summer are there fewer people because older people go to villages in the summer. This is Islamic faith. This is Muslim education.”

“A woman at the cemetery was given a paper to be distributed. “I read it and I'm giving it to you, you'll read it and give to somebody else,” she said. This paper says that people should have faith. My granddaughter learnt Tatar language. She graduated from school with excellent grades. She's got a long, wide fashionable skirt. She pins her scarf up in Arabian style and starts praying. She's doing

her best so far; I don't know what's going to happen in the future. Her father turns off the TV and leaves the room when she starts praying. Neither her father, nor her mother prays.

She met an Arabian guy in the Mosque. I say that he is a good guy; he does not abuse alcohol, does not smoke, and he reads namaz with his beautiful voice.”



Guzel Sabirova was born in Togliatti city (today Samara) located in the Samara Province (Russia). She graduated from Ulianovsk State University and is a postgraduate student at the Sociology Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Her thesis is devoted to Islamic education in Moscow and the multicultural city in the post-soviet period. She lives in Moscow.

Women's Oral Stories: Past and Present

ELMIRA ARAPOVA, ERKEAIM JOROBKOVA (Kyrgyzstan)

Ms. Arapova and Ms. Jorobekova interviewed a woman referred to only as: "a woman of two worlds."

Osh City is more than 3000 years old and is located in southern Kyrgyzstan. The social structure is patriarchal and traditional. Children are brought up under the strictest obedience and must follow the customs of their ancestors. In 1995, a young divorced Kyrgyz woman with a two-year-old child challenged this society in which only intra-ethnic marriages are acceptable. She married Hubert Iosfan, a German man who was not only a foreigner, but also followed a different religion. Her marriage and move to Germany required cutting her social ties at home.



"I got married just because I loved this kind man. I fell in love with him with all my heart and went after him having left my relatives and my motherland. When I left my first husband, my son was only 8 months old. I could not stand the continuous threats and beatings by my Kyrgyz husband and his mother, who was trying by all means to get rid of an uninvited daughter-in-law. The first marriage placed fear into my heart. For 3 years afterwards, I didn't want to be involved with any man... I was afraid of them."

Once Hubert and I got to know each other better, I introduced him to my parents, though my mom knew about him before. But I was really scared to tell my dad about my new relationship. Eventually it was Hubert, who said that we should not hide our relations from my father, and that he couldn't continue like this, as it is not his way. Well, when Hubert came to our place and started talking to my father, my mom and I quietly left the room, to let them have a man-to-man talk. Hubert said that he could manage speaking to my father in Russian. My mom and I stood behind the door; we were really worried. We were sort of nervous and felt like giggling and crying simultaneously. Hubert had trouble speaking Russian and eventually called me to translate his words to my father. You can't imagine how hard it was for me. I worked as an interpreter at that time, but this was a completely different situation. I had to translate words of love, a proposal to marry Hubert and my consent to move to Germany! My father was quite surprised. He thought that Hubert was only my colleague. I translated automatically, and my heart beat so strongly that it seemed it would jump out of my body. My father kept silent for quite a long period of time, and then, he said: "It's your life, but please do not spread this news." He did not want the whole city to talk about us. He and my mother were afraid of what people would say if Hubert left me alone again. I told Hubert about my decision, and I still

remember his words; they made me burst into tears: I will marry you and I am going to take with me everything that belongs to you. At that point, I understood that I would be taking my son with me.”

Elmira Arapova graduated from Moscow Lomonosov State University, Faculty of Philosophy in 1988. She holds a Ph.D., heads the department of Social Work and Public Administration at Osh State University, and is also the leader of the Public Fund “Youth Media Centre.”

Erkeaim Jorobekova graduated from the Faculty of Philosophy of Moscow Lomonosov University in 1968. She holds a Ph.D. and works as a professor and dean of the Faculty of Philosophy and management technologies at Osh State University.

Women's Stories about Aging and Gender Identities

Galleries of Uzbek Women's Portraits

MARFUA TOCKTAHODJAEVA, DONA ABDRAZAKOVA, ALMAZ KADYROVA
(Uzbekistan)

This group project aims to document changes in Uzbek women's experiences from Soviet times to the present. In Soviet times, women had access to education, paying jobs, the social welfare system, health care services, and a certain degree of freedom and independence. How were their achievements obtained, what price was paid, and can their accomplishments be maintained during present times?

The following is the story and interview of Robia.



Growing up without a mother and father in a small town that looked more like a village made life hard for Robia. It made her different from her peers. In order to survive and protect herself, she developed a strong willed personality, and the ability to react quickly and cleverly. When recalling her childhood, Robia describes her grandmother as a kind, wise person whom her neighbors and relatives often came to for good advice. She shares one of her grandmother's astute sayings.

"It is interesting that I have had three names in my life. When I was born, I was called "Rayisa." But when my mother, in desperation, sent my two sisters to my father in Chirakchi she mixed up our birth certificates and my eldest sister Roza got mine. That's how I became Roza. I was a few months old when my father left and my mother decided to give me to my grandmother because she had to establish her own life. My grandmother immediately gave me a new name. She said: "Why Rayisa? I'm going to call her Robia!" That's how I got the third name, Robia."

*"Three names –
one fate. I have
had three names."*

"Once my mother and stepfather paid us a visit. They brought me presents—a dress and a pair of galoshes. I was very happy. And, despite the fact that it was summer, I put on those galoshes and went out to play. I probably got so engaged in the game that I forgot about the time and that I took off the galoshes. When my grandmother called me back home I came without the galoshes. The first thing my grandmother asked was: "Where are your galoshes?" I dashed back, but there were no galoshes. Grandmother was so upset and said: "What will you wear in winter?" Then my stepfather said: "Don't worry, daughter, I'll bring you another pair of galoshes. Don't shout at her." And I went

back out to play. That's what I remember. I immediately told this story to the children. And when I said: "My father will bring me another pair of galoshes" one girl replied: "You are lying, he's not your father. You do not have a father." I got numb for a while and then said: "No, he is my father. I've got three fathers and three mothers." I raised my head in pride and added: "And you have only one father and one mother." The children were surprised. They came close to me, waiting for an explanation. Then I started counting: grandmother and grandfather, my mother and my stepfather, my biological father and my stepmother. Then I went home feeling proud of myself. Children are simply children. Back then no one said anything against me. When I came home, I told my grandmother what happened. She said: "You were right. No one has three of each – just you."

My grandmother used to tell me lots of wise Uzbek proverbs, mostly related to domestic problems. And a family is the most sacred thing that a human being has. She liked to repeat: "A husband has pilaf (traditional rice meal mixed with meat and vegetables) and there are small rocks in the pilaf. A woman that can swallow these rocks will overcome all difficulties." I use to say to my grandmother: "These rocks could be thrown away." My grandmother replied: "Only when you've swallowed these rocks will you obtain happiness in life." As time passed, I understood my grandmother's saying. When I got married, life taught me to swallow the rocks. I moved from the city to a village. Rural and urban environments and work conditions are very different. In silence, I endured. I tolerated everything—always biting my tongue. Tolerance, and overcoming difficulties have become a habit, my life style."

Marfua Tocktahodjaeva was born in Tashkent in 1944. She's worked as an architect for 30 years, holds a Ph.D., and is the author of numerous publications in the area of urban development and the history of architecture. She is also the recipient of the International Award, "100 Heroines." She currently lives in Tashkent and is a member of the Women's Resource Center of Tashkent.

Dona Abdrazakova now serves as a Gender Adviser to UNDP in Bratislava, Slovakia. She holds a Ph.D. in History.

Almaz Kadyrova was born in Moscow in 1959. She graduated from Tashkent Polytechnic Institute, Department of Architecture in 1981 and presently works at the Research Institute of Art as well as at the non-governmental organization, Women's Resource Center.

Elderly Women's Oral Histories from Rural Ukraine

GALINA DATSIUK (Ukraine)

Galina Datsiuk's project aims to incorporate women into Ukraine history and demonstrate the veracity of their significance, because she says, "Ukraine will not become a free country until its history includes women."

Although women's oral stories were a component of her activity as a professional journalist, all the material Ms. Datsiuk collected was not used because it was seen as subjective and unimportant by newspapers and other publications. Oral stories enable her to "look at life with women's eyes," together with the women. She says, "Their small dramas, secrets, histories, and amazing memories are like honeycombs filled with healing honey. If one does not feel the scent, the taste and aroma, one cannot see clearly its amber color."

The following is the interview of Paraskoviya Tverdokhlib from Donetskaya oblast (Ukraine)



"I was born in 1930 in Zaporozhskaya oblast, Andreevsky district, village of Berestovo, farm Sachki. We lived there until 1934. The family was big—12 children. Three children died when they were small. The elder brother married a rich girl from the neighboring village. We were poor and the family of the bride was against the wedding. But the bride's brother was a secretary in Berestovo, so the newly-weds asked him to register their marriage secretly. Afterwards, it was too late to protest. So, when the rich were dispossessed, our family was as well. They considered that since my sister-in-law was from a rich family the overall property had to be confiscated. A lot was taken from us. But our rich in-laws moved to Makeevka right away. What could we do? Two parents and so many of us children. Indeed, by that time the elder children had married and did not live with us. Only four of us lived with our parents: Raya, Galia, my brother, Misha and me. I was the youngest. When my mother was young she worked for rich people and her chest of drawers was full of clothes, which she earned. When we had nothing to eat Mother went to town to exchange the clothes for food."

"Maybe we survived because we were very close to one another. Nobody in our family died during famine. Our next-door neighbor was my father's brother. Several of his children died. They stole food even from each other although everybody was starving. They stole sometimes from us."

Mother would hide something and they'd steal it. We ate mostly beetroot. Mother cooked beets, and we drank the water and then ate the beets."

"Our distant relatives from the neighboring village asked mother to give me to them, but my parents said that if we were destined to die then we would die as a whole family. Then, in 1934, we moved to Donetskaya oblast because my father got into trouble. He was working on the threshing-floor in a kolkhoz (collective farm). One day, someone stole two sacks of seed grain for which he was responsible. In the evening, my father's brother who worked in the office came and said to him: "Go away. Otherwise they will arrest you in the morning." We collected our things and followed our nose. Mother went in one direction and father, in another. Father knew where we were but for a long time he was afraid to come to us. He hid in various villages. Later, mother told us: "I go in the steppe and suddenly see a man who looks like my Peter. When he comes nearer I see that it is him. We sat together and cried about our ill fortune and after that he went away." Mother came home and brought us some maize to eat. All the way home, she was afraid that someone might take the food. It was a time of famine and very dangerous to have food with you."

"Later, when father's brother moved here, father also came and our life became better. Before that time we were very poor, very poor."

Galina Datsiuk was born in 1956, in the village of Kordyshev, Shumsky district of the Ternopol oblast in Ukraine. She graduated in 1978 from Kiev Taras Shevchenko National University. For 25 years, she worked as a journalist. She has published several books and made several films. For the last 10 years, she has been involved in social work and leads the "Spadshina" Women's Center. She lives in Kiev.

Women's Songs – Women's Stories

BAKHRINISO KABILOVA (Tajikistan)

Ms. Kabilova is an expert on traditional Tajik music. Her project aims to explore women from different social groups and to establish if Tajik songs are divided by separate sectors, each in compliance with its own genre.

Previously, she had not studied the genres, forms and local custom of songs. However, she recently noticed that mostly unhappy women, especially widows suffering from grief and unhappiness, perform Falak (a singing genre of highland Tajiks).

Through this project, Ms. Kabilova had the opportunity to understand a woman via her song, as the songs improvised by women are sung in different life situations, acquiring a sort of emotional tuning fork. "When a woman is engaged in the story and in her own emotions, she becomes sometimes a story-teller, sometimes a witness, sometimes an associate and sometimes a hero. Only the exploration of women's stories will provide an opportunity for an in-depth study of women's songs."

The following is excerpted from the interview of Mariam Davletova. When she starts singing, it is obvious that the song is a requiem inspired by her life.



"We did not lose anybody in the civil war (1992-1997), thank God. However, echoes of the war reached us later, either as a result of the related stress or fear. Wholesale death attacked our family. My youngest aunt, who was only 18 years old, and absolutely healthy, died suddenly. Then, in one year and three months time my cousin's son was killed. He was also 18 years old. Forty days after his death, another aunt died. One year and two months later, the second son of the same aunt died. In total, in a period of about 5 to 6 years, we buried up to 12 people one after the other. As to the songs, you know in the past I composed verses when I was hurt and felt offended. One does not sing songs because of cheer. One sings when it hurts. I did not do it seriously. I could have composed when people were talking, having some conversations. I could have done it impromptu. However, a few years ago when my dissertation was destroyed, I seriously wrote traditional gazels (a style of poem) with traditional rhythm and rhyme. I used to say that I had never written, for me it was not even a hobby. All women in my place composed while for me, back then, it was not important. The real pain came, probably, as in the verses, after the death of my brother [pause]."

"When my brother was being buried I could not cry; I was not able to cry then. At my mother's funeral all the emotions poured out then. Yes-yes-yes-yes, no, before my mother's death, even before

my mother's death, I composed. Literally, it happened maybe two to three years ago when my cousin died, I wrote two to three very long verses." [Starts singing]:

Oh, my brother, you've passed away having broken our feelings
You added more pain to our full of pain hearts and left us
At the day of your funeral the rocks and the trees started crying
You, a soul of the sister, tell me who became happy because you died.

Four mothers have always been waiting for you
You, a hope of the family, forgot everyone and left
Nobody knows whom you had made an agreement with and left

All your life you'd been guarding your wife and your children
What had upset you that you left?

It is worth suffering for the sake of you
Because during your short life you were spoiling us

From the day of birth a human follows a path to death
You've confirmed for one more time an Almighty Power of God

[Gets suffocated by tears and cannot continue right away]: *"I still cannot sing; it hurts so much. Sometimes when I'm upset at home, when I'm running domestic errands, when the children are not at home I sing the songs. Then it comes out with tears."*

Bakhriniso Kabilova was born in Tajikistan, in Dushanbe city in 1960. She graduated from the Theoretical Composing Department of Chaikovskiy Moscow State Conservatory in 1983, and presently works as a researcher at the Institute of History, Archeology and Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan, which is named after A. Donin.

Women's Stories about Life under the Soviet Union and during Post-Soviet Transition

Women's Memory as a Reflection of the History of Azerbaijan in the Twentieth Century

LALA SARIEVA (Azerbaijan)

Ms. Sarieva's project aims to provide insight into the history of Azerbaijan from the perspective of women's experiences. In Azerbaijan, the role of women in society has been either underestimated or diminished. Women themselves have not always had an adequate perception of their importance in society. Reconstruction of women's experience is of great importance for their social development and their struggle against gender stereotypes.

The following story is excerpted from the interview of Galina Alieva. She was born in 1931 into an ethnically mixed family: her mother was Russian, her father, Azeri. She married a Georgian man and is now widowed with two children. She is college educated, works as a journalist, and lives in Baku.



“My father was arrested in 1937. By 1939, we were in a very difficult financial situation. There was a telegram that my father was passing by and permission was given to meet with him. My mother, grandfather, grandmother and I went there. He was on his way to Siberia. His sister was afraid to lose her position, so she betrayed him and did not go to the meeting. I personally remember a tiny courtyard, and my father dressed in pajamas saying to me – you’ll be a clever girl and you should study hard. And we sold lots of stuff from home in order to buy him some food. He was exiled to Magadan, and on their way there they kept throwing envelopes out of the train windows and people sent those letters to us. We received news from my father only until May 1941, after that we’ve never heard from him. My mother was sending him parcels, and in two years time these parcels came back. My mother had a fit of hysteria then because it turned out he died in September 1941. We did not know anything about that. After my father was arrested, a family of Galyavkins was moved into our apartment. “You are the people’s enemies while we are honest soviet citizens and everything in the apartment belongs to us.” For a long period of time that was the slogan in our communal apartment.”

“Then my mother worked in a very complicated way. In the beginning, she worked at the kindergarten but later her nervous system failed and she entered the Postal Department from where she was fired as a wife of a repressed husband. Fortunately, she got another job quickly and she worked there until she died; she was scared to lose it.”

“My husband, a Georgian, wanted so much for me to be a housewife but I did not want it. Very often there was talk about that when I was carrying heavy bags from the market. He said many times: “Why don’t you tell me?” But he would not do it himself. I had a pathological fear of his jealousy although I did not give him a reason. He was cruel in that issue. I was teaching my son to wash the plates and to take out the garbage and my husband arrived and stopped it in a second. For a long period of time, we lived apart. I know that I was a beloved wife but he showed it only when we were alone. Once, he even took a broom and started sweeping the floor when all of a sudden he saw his mother coming and he left the broom scared that, save God, his mother would see it. In principle, he was not helping me.”

Lala Sarieva (Azerbaijan) was born in Baku in 1965. She graduated from the Library Department of Baku State University in 1990 and presently works as a junior researcher at the International Center of Social Studies in Baku, where she still lives.

Women of Kyrgyzstan in a Transition Period

RAYA OSMONALIEVA (Kyrgyzstan)

Ms. Osmonalieva's project aims to explore the changing status of women in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan during the transition period, as well as to identify major trends in the adaptation of traditional gender roles and the major problems of the gender equality movement.

In Central Asia, men traditionally played dominant roles in all areas of life. Women, despite equality on paper, did not have any rights at all. During the last decade many changes have taken place in all areas of life, including radical changes in traditional gender roles. Market reforms led to a situation in which men were unable to play their bread-winning role. Instead, women started to play this role (many women left their families to earn money in other regions, such as in Russia, where many women became engaged in small business). Thus, the status of women has changed, even in more traditional villages in the southern part of the country.

Even during Soviet times, women from the South experienced more difficult circumstances than women from elsewhere in Kyrgyzstan. One reason for this was the need to secure "cotton independence" of the USSR. It was really hard and exhausting to harvest cotton, also called "white gold." Practically all arable land in the South of Kyrgyzstan was allocated for growing this "gold." Cotton is a crop that requires hard work and care from early spring till late autumn.

The following is from the interview with Nurisa Kochkorova, 55 years of age, Suzak district, Jalal-Abad region of Kyrgyzstan.



"At that time all women worked in the fields, none stayed at home. Even women with infants worked. They came to the field at seven in the morning whipping up the livestock and carrying a cradle on their head. Women left their children under sheds (these sheds were called field stations) to protect them from the heat. Older women, who were not able to work in the field, took care of children. Children of different ages, starting from infants and ending with children of 7 years age, were at the field station. They were running and playing whereas their mothers were working in the cotton fields. If a child cried, somebody would call his\her mom from the field so that she could feed him. The kolkhoz organized lunches for the children. All children except for infants ate the same food their mothers did. At that time there was no special lunch for children. Older children took care of the younger ones. Well, these were the sort of original kindergartens we had in the South."

"In the evening after hard work in the field, women came back home carrying cradles on their heads and driving their livestock. In the evening, they had to bake bread and do household chores. Heads of brigades went to each house and appointed a number of people who had to go and work in the field the next day. Parents were paid for their work, but children were not. The kolkhoz allocated a land parcel for each family. A timekeeper checked the work every evening. In 1970-1980 when

kindergartens were just opened, there were lots of difficulties. At that time children did not know what kindergartens were. And everything was new and scary for them. It was difficult for them to adjust to a new way of life. We, employees of the kindergarten, had difficulties in making children observe the daily routine and hygiene rules. Parents sent their children as they were at home: unwashed and dirty. We washed them and arranged clean beds for them. Back home they were sleeping on the floor. In the kindergarten, children were afraid of sleeping on the beds because the sheets were too clean for them. They associated white sheets with hospitals; they thought that they actually were in the hospital...No conditions like this existed in their families. Children were crying and refused to go to bed. When we were feeding them, they ate only bread and they refused to eat a hot meal. This happened because at home they ate only bread and drank tea. At first parents were worried about their children. They thought that it would have been much better if their children were with them in the field. Later we opened kindergartens on each land parcel. About 2000 families lived on one parcel. Kindergartens could fit 90 children, but we accepted 150 and two children had to sleep in one bed. However, there was no possibility to accept all the children into the kindergarten. Some children still spent their time at the field stations, where two or three older women were taking care of 20-30 children. They were actually appointed by the head of the brigade at the meetings of mothers. The kolkhoz paid their salaries. And women were working in the field under any weather conditions, be it rainy or cold.”

Raya Osmonalieva was born in 1952, in Kochkor village of Naryn Oblast. She graduated from the Philosophic-Economic Department of Kazakh State University (Almaty) and completed her postgraduate study at the Kyrgyz Technical University and Bishkek Humanitarian University. She holds a Ph.D. in Sociology, and has written a monograph and more than 30 scientific publications. She lives in Bishkek.

Social Portrait of Issyk-Kul Business Women's Stories of Success

JANYL K. BOKONTAYEVA (Kyrgyzstan)

Ms. Bokontayeva's project aims to use the methodology of oral history to survey women who have achieved business success in the new market environment of the Kyrgyz Republic, and to analyze their reasoning, values, way of life and relationship with the social environment, as well as the economic, political and cultural aspects that influence their decisions. The business enterprise is a totally new phenomenon in the Kyrgyz Republic, having been prohibited for ideological reasons under the former Soviet Union. This groundbreaking research will also explore how the women who were surveyed "made" themselves and the experiences they encountered along the way.

Janyl K. Bokontayeva interviewed Kulipa Juzumaliyeva.



Ms. Juzumaliyeva was born in 1947 in the village of Taldy-Suu, the Tiup district of Issyk-Kul Oblast in Kyrgyzstan. She is presently Chairwoman of "Ak-Jalga", a joint-stock company. The company is located in the village of Kyzyl-Suu of the Jety-Oguz district and belongs to the Business Association of the Kyrgyz Republic. "Ak-Jalga" produces cream, butter, cheese and other dairy products, which are in popular demand by consumers. The Government of the Kyrgyz Republic gave "Ak-Jalga" an award as the best enterprise for the year 2001.

"After the collapse of the Soviet Union, our dairy factory was on the verge of closing down. To survive, the factory staff started a business. First, we grew field crops. We rented land from the kolkhoz and started growing potatoes, wheat and barley. Then, to process the yield, we bought a mill. We milled the grain for flour, baked bread and sold it to the people. The potatoes were sold at the market. Step by step, we accumulated working capital. When we had enough money, we started attracting people from the private sector. We said to them: sell us your milk. We started buying milk from people. It was in 1995-1996. We got up to 500 liters a day, and then more and more. Now, for example, we receive 35 tons a day from only the people in our region. The annual turnover of our factory is 55 million soms; we pay 12 million soms as taxes to the budget. In the beginning, as I said, we had big problems. But I think that everything depends on diligence and the painstaking work of every individual. If a person is looking for a way out of the difficulties he or she will find that way, which ultimately brings him or her to success. I had many very unpleasant discussions (with officials). We heard many times: "Your factory is dying, where do you take raw milk; it will be difficult for you, you will not survive and will not be able to revive your production, etc. We did not pay any attention to such talk. We worked even harder. I think persistence is very important. I am an optimist by nature. Often I gathered my staff and said to them: Let us not give up. Let us not sit on our hands. Let us keep looking for a way out of the difficulties. The most important aspect for me in my effort to keep the

factory working was supporting the staff. I had to provide work for them, as they were good professionals. As you know, after the collapse of the Soviet Union many qualified people were left without work. So my staff and I started looking for milk all over the Issyk-Kul oblast. The range of our search was 150 kilometers. We even went to collect milk in Tiupsky district. So, that is how we won. Now, all the difficulties are in the past; our dairy production is successful. Our products are in great demand among the people of the Issyk-Kul oblast. We have our own shops in Kyzyl-Suu and in Karakol. Under the Soviet Union, we worked according to plans and I could not fulfill my potential, as at that time the requirements were different. Under the Soviet Union, we had to obey orders from the top regarding output, production and distribution. We were never involved in marketing, only production. And now the work is different. We had to learn to do everything by ourselves: organization, production, marketing, and finances. A businessperson calculates everything, thinks over all the steps he or she is going to make, sometimes takes risks. Without the support of my family I would have never become a businesswoman. My family supports me in all aspects, especially in countenance—although, I provide material support. I have 4 children, one son and 3 daughters. Sure, I am involved in housework. At home, I am a mother for my children and as a wife I totally obey my husband. If I have to I do the housework. But usually my family helps me.”

Janyl Bokontayeva was born in 1965 in Karakol (Kyrgyzstan). In 1988, she graduated from the Leningrad State University, Faculty of Economics. Presently, she is chair of the department of Philosophy at the Issyk-Kul State University. She has a Ph.D. in Sociology, and has written more than 20 publications. She lives in Karakol.

Map of the Region

The Caucasus and Central Asia



Contact Information

OLGA RZAEVA Baku Musical College 2/11 Gabjibekova Str. Baku, Azerbaijan 370000 olgaar@yahoo.com	GUZEL SABIROVA Institute of Sociology of Russian Academy of Science, 1309 35 A. Ostrivitaynova Str. Moscow, Russia, sabirova_00@yahoo.com	BAKHRINISO KABILOVA Institute of History, Ethnography under Academy of Science 315 Zetkin Str. Dushanbe, Tadjikistan
NARGIZ HALIMOVA Institute of Philosophy and Law under Academy of Science apt.131 19/1 Gissarskay Str. Dushanbe, Tajikistan famafa@ac.tajik.net	ELMIRA ARAPOVA, ERKAIM JOROBKOVA Osh State University 30 Isanova Str., Osh City, Kyrgyzstan 720000 cnsb_osh@yahoo.com	LALA SARIEVA International Center of Social Research 12/3 Sheyh Shamil Str. Baku, 370001, Azerbaijan tfaradov@yahoo.com
MARINA TABUKASHVILI Open Society Georgia Foundation 10A Chovelidze Str. Tbilisi, 380008. tabu@mega.osgf.ge	UZBEK GROUP Women's Resource Center 81 Adylova Str. Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 700084 twrc@freenet.uz	RAYA OSMONALIEVA Tourism Academy 123/77 Toktogula Str. Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 720000 rayaosmon@freenet.kg
LUDMILA MAYGKAYA Tajik State National University, Apt 69 9 Navoi str. Dushanbe Tajikistan, 734026 mlv@ac.tajik.net	GALINA DATZIUK. Women's Center "Spadshina," Apt.76 15 Knayjuy zaton Str. Kiev, Ukraine, 03068 halyna@public icyb.kiev.ua	JANYL BOKONTAEVA Issyk-Kul State University 21/5 Kashka-Suu str. Karakol, Kyrgyzstan, 720000 rjanyl7@mail.ru
DR. DEBRA L. SCHULTZ, NIKKI PERSLEY Network Women's Program Open Society Institute 400 West 59 Street New York, NY 10029 women@sorosny.org www.soros.org/women	ELMIRA SHISHKARAEVA MIRLAN MULKUBATOV Soros Foundation - Kyrgyzstan 55A Logvinenko Str. 720040 Bishkek elmira@soros.kg www.soros.kg	DR. ANDREA PETO 1148 Budapest Csernyus u. 74/B. Hungary petoand@hotmail.com

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